



Yellowstone River *Conservation District* Council

POSITION STATEMENT

Watercraft Passage

Adopted 2/18/2010

Position Statement: The Yellowstone River Conservation District Council (YRCDC) encourages the development of mutually agreeable solutions that provide for the safe passage of small watercraft through or around irrigation diversion structures in the Yellowstone River.

Introduction:

Recreational use of the Yellowstone River by watercraft, both powered and unpowered, is an increasingly important component of the many legitimate, but sometimes competing, uses of the river resources. Power boaters, canoeists, rafters and float tubers ply the waters the length of the river to fish, hunt, bird watch, or just to enjoy the scenery and tranquility the river has to offer. Six major irrigation diversion structures downriver from the City of Billings span the width of the river and effectively stop the movement of watercraft (Huntley, Waco-Custer, Rancher Ditch, Yellowstone, Cartersville and Intake). There are an additional 12 minor irrigation structures downstream from Gardiner that partially block the river or block one channel of the river and that may affect the movement of watercraft.

Public access points that allow the launching of boats are often separated by these irrigation structures. Floaters cannot launch at one access and take out at the next downriver because an irrigation structure prevents their safe passage. This restricts the use of the river and may contribute to trespass issues by boaters wanting to use the river but unable to access it. These structures also pose a very real danger to anyone who might go over them and into the turbulent pool below. In addition, most of these structures do not have adequate warning signs on the riverbank to let boaters know they are approaching a dam and which side of the river is most appropriate for portaging.

Proposed Solutions:

Following are some actions that would alleviate the issues created by the existence of irrigation structures that span the river.

- Any new structures that would impede the movement of watercraft should contain design provisions that allow reasonable passage through or around the structure by small watercraft.
- When existing structures are modified or maintained, design changes that would provide for passage of watercraft should be evaluated and incorporated when feasible.

CONSERVATION DISTRICT COUNCIL MEMBERS: Carbon – Custer – Dawson – Park – Prairie – Richland – Rosebud – Stillwater, Sweet Grass – Treasure – Yellowstone – McKenzie County, North Dakota – MACD – RAC Chair

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- Every structure that impedes passage of watercraft must have warning signs on the riverbank at appropriate distances above the structure to alert boaters of the existence of the structure and the appropriate bank to use to portage or float around the structure.
- Public river access points should have signs warning boaters of the existence of structures below and above and the proper avoidance techniques.

Role of the YRCDC:

Because it is an organization that spans more than 500 miles of the river, the YRCDC is in a position to take a leadership role in assisting river users to avoid conflicts and minimize dangers.

Actions taken by the YRCDC should include:

- Reviewing plans for dam construction and re-construction and insisting that provisions for safe watercraft passage are considered as part of the design. Encouraging discussions between irrigation and recreation user groups and agencies to find reasonable solutions to conflicts.
- Encouraging the erection and maintenance of warning signs above structures through agreements between irrigation and recreation user groups, the owner/operator of the structure and riverbank landowners and by assisting these groups to find funding sources for signage.
- Encouraging discussions between user groups and landowners to provide easements for portage routes around dams if necessary.
- Encouraging the inclusion of dam warning information at river access points, in floater's guide maps and other information that is made available to river users.

References:

Final Report, Historic Events Timeline, November 17, 2008, prepared for Yellowstone River Conservation District Council by Tony Thatcher, DTM Consulting and Karin Boyd, Applied Geomorphology Inc.